

1 ORAL HISTORY OF: Robert Benyas
2 INTERVIEWED BY: Stanley Meretsky
3 DATE OF INTERVIEW: Wednesday, September 22, 2004
4 LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Jewish Federation
5 SUBJECT MATTER: Role as photographer of Jewish
6 community events

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8 MR. MERETSKY: Today is September 22nd, 2004, and my
9 name is Stan Meretsky, and it's my pleasure to be interviewing
10 Robert Benyas. All of his life he's been behind the camera.
11 Today we've got him in front of the camera. So the table's
12 been turned on him.

13 But as I was preparing for today's interview, I kept
14 thinking how you were like a fly on the wall, Bob. You've
15 been at so many meetings and events, the things that you've
16 seen and heard. So after we've talked about your history,
17 your life, I want to hear about some of the juicy statements
18 that you've heard, some of the events you've been at. Kind of
19 the Peyton Place of Detroit's Federation sort of a thing.

20 But let's start at the beginning. Why don't you
21 tell me your birth date, where you were born, and let's start
22 talking about your family a little bit.

23 MR. BENYAS: Okay. I was born October 12, 1923, in
24 Omaha, Nebraska. My father was born in Michigan, my mother
25 lived in Michigan, but my dad went out to Omaha for a job. In

1 '23 it wasn't that easy to find a job. I'm not sure what he
2 did, but he worked in Omaha. I was born, and then the family
3 came back. I went to school in Detroit. So I don't even
4 remember Omaha.

5 I went to the usual schools that Jewish kids went
6 to: Roosevelt, Durfee and Central. Then my family moved, and
7 I had to graduate from Northwestern.

8 I was a photographer very early. Somebody gave me a
9 camera, I don't know, who and I could take pictures. I didn't
10 know what I was doing, but the pictures came out okay. And I
11 was a professional because I sold them to neighbors. I
12 photographed the babies on the block and would sell them for a
13 quarter, whatever I could get, so I could buy paper and
14 chemistry and things like that. So I felt that I was a
15 professional from the age of about 15. And now I'm 80, going
16 to be 81 pretty soon. So that's a long time to be a
17 professional of anything.

18 I took some pictures in high school, and then I went
19 to Wayne University. I was learning all the time, mainly by
20 talking to other photographers. I didn't have any formal
21 schooling. I just made pictures and looked at them, and if I
22 didn't like them, I tried to find out what's wrong. People
23 were very helpful. A lot of the guys on the *News* and the *Free*
24 *Press* were very helpful to me when I was starting out, and I
25 did a lot of photo journalism.

1 Then I was drafted in the Army, and after basic
2 training I was lucky enough to be sent to photo school. I had
3 qualified for airplane mechanic, but they didn't want to send
4 me to airplane mechanic school. They sent me to photo school.
5 So then I learned some technical things. I learned things I
6 had no idea about: how film is made and things like that.
7 But all the time I was a pretty decent photographer. I have
8 some of those early pictures, and they're okay. I still like
9 them.

10 After I graduated from the photo school, I was at
11 Richmond Army Air Base, and I was a photographer there. Then
12 I was sent overseas to India. I spent two years in India, and
13 that was very fascinating. And I was a photographer. I would
14 travel throughout India. There was no combat, I didn't have
15 to see combat, but it was mostly training missions that they
16 had in India, where they were preparing people who were
17 finishing up in Europe before they went to Japan. So there
18 were training schools.

19 I did a lot of so-called public relations
20 photography, and I was able to photograph a lot of India and I
21 made a nice album for myself, which I still have.

22 After I was discharged, I came home for a little
23 while, and I heard about a course in Chicago that was very
24 prestigious. There were 10 world-famous photographers that
25 were going to speak over a five-week period, and they weren't

1 just going to give a lecture. Each one was going to be there
2 for three days. So I got to work with the greats.

3 Weegee is one that influenced me a lot. I don't
4 know if you know Weegee, but he was a wonderful photographer
5 in New York that captured murders and fires. He gave me a
6 flare for watching what to photograph. Be alert and be ready
7 to take pictures.

8 My first pictures that were published in *Life*
9 *Magazine* were pictures that I took of Weegee teaching us how
10 to photograph a murder. It was in Chicago. We took a dummy
11 dressed up in a tuxedo, and we put him in the bushes, the
12 whole class, about 25 of us, and then he showed us how he
13 photographed a murder. And I photographed him. My instructor
14 sent to them to *Life Magazine* and they were published. So
15 that was kind of neat, to get published in *Life Magazine*. It
16 had about three picturers in the spread.

17 Then there was a photographer there who was a *Life*
18 staffer, who was probably my greatest influence. His name was
19 Wayne Miller, and he was a *Life* photographer, and he allowed
20 me to go with him on some assignments. I probably learned my
21 greatest lesson from him. There was a mine disaster in
22 Illinois called Centralia, and he went there to photograph it,
23 and I went with him. It was terrible. Guys were lost in the
24 mine, women were crying. And I couldn't understand at that
25 time how you could photograph the terrible things that were

1 going on. But he explained to me, that's their job, that it's
2 important that people know about this, and you have to be calm
3 and you have to take pictures, because I was practically
4 crying. So I learned a lot from Wayne Miller.

5 After I graduated, he put together the Family of Man
6 show, which was a fantastic exhibit in New York, at the
7 Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. I submitted pictures to
8 it, but unfortunately none of them were in there.

9 After I graduated from the Institute of Design,
10 which was considered a very famous school at that time.
11 Great, great artists came as lecturers. The head of the
12 school was Laszlo Mohole-Nagy. Pictures of his are in the
13 Detroit Institute of Arts. He brought all his friends in from
14 Europe who had survived the war, and they came and spoke to
15 us. A fantastic lecturer was Buckminster Fuller. I just
16 stood there and listened with my mouth open and my eyes open.
17 This man was really something. And I was influenced by a lot
18 of important people. I'll get to the most important person
19 that influenced me pretty soon.

20 After I graduated, I was recruited for a job in
21 Coldwater, Michigan. There was a factory there that
22 photographed store displays and mannequins. I learned a lot
23 about so-called still life, but these were big. They were
24 full-sized mannequins or a chrome display. It was tough
25 photography. I pretty much had to do it on my own. They

1 didn't have a photographer. They used to get clippings from
2 the manufacturers and they wanted to their own photography.
3 So I learned about that type of photography.

4 Let me go back to Chicago. When I was photographing
5 Weegee, I wanted to get a high angle, and there was a guy
6 there that I didn't know. And I said, let me climb on your
7 shoulder. I want to get a high angle. And he said okay. He
8 was a little bigger than me, a little stronger. So I boosted
9 up, and that was one of the pictures printed in *Life Magazine*.
10 So we became friends.

11 His name was Jack Kaufman. We started double
12 dating. Nobody had any money, so what a date was, usually you
13 went to somewhere where there was a meeting and they were
14 giving out free pizza, so that was a date.

15 Now, we didn't know that probably a lot of those
16 were probably Communist or Wallace meetings or something like
17 that. But we didn't care. We went there to eat and drink and
18 find girls.

19 I went to Coldwater and then came back to Detroit.
20 I was there almost a year. It was okay, but I knew that
21 that's not what I wanted to do. So I came back to Detroit and
22 started working out of my house. I worked for Federation;
23 they didn't have anybody. I worked for the United Way; they
24 didn't have anybody doing what I was doing. I was 35mm in
25 those days. Everybody had a 4x5 speed graphic that could take

1 one picture; I could take 36. There wasn't anybody doing
2 that.

3 The newspaper guys were speed graphics. A few guys
4 had Roloflexes, 2.25 pictures. I also had a Roloflex that I
5 used maybe for cars.

6 **MR. MERETSKY:** You're talking about like the
7 beginning of the '60s, late '50s?

8 **MR. BENYAS:** No, no. Talking about early '50s.
9 '49, '50.

10 Then '51 comes the most important influence, who's
11 sitting over in the corner there, Shirley Benyas.
12 Interestingly enough, she lived on the same street I lived on
13 but we didn't know each other. We were both living on
14 Pingree, but she was a block and a half away from me.

15 We met at a party, and right away we started dating
16 and doing things. I took her with me on some of my
17 assignments. Shirley was a singer and needed a picture for a
18 head shot. I took the picture and delivered it, and I didn't
19 want to take any money, but she paid me, and I took the money.
20 So we became friends after that. It wasn't long after that
21 that we became engaged and married in March of '51, and we're
22 married 53 years. So Shirley's been a big influence on me.
23 My best critic.

24 Jack Kaufman, he didn't want to continue his
25 schooling in Chicago. He decided to go to California. There

1 was a famous photographic school out there, mainly connected
2 with Hollywood, and he thought maybe he could get into
3 Hollywood. He graduated but he couldn't get a job. There was
4 nepotism all over the place. You had to know somebody to even
5 get a job. He was selling shoes.

6 He came back a couple times, and then called me in
7 Detroit, and then we would go out. One time he called, he
8 said, I'm getting married in California, but my bride's family
9 is very upset. They want a wedding here. We're going to have
10 a wedding in Detroit. Would you come? I said, of course I'll
11 come, Jack.

12 I said, what are you doing, Jack? He said, I'm
13 selling shoes. I can't get into photography. And I'm busier
14 than hell. I've got all kind of assignments, you know. It
15 was the beginning of Sinai Hospital and I was their
16 photographer. Federation kept me busy and other charities. I
17 said, Jack, I'm so busy taking pictures, I'm working out of my
18 basement. Why don't you come back and we'll start a business
19 together. He said, no, my wife loves California.

20 I happened to get so busy I actually couldn't handle
21 assignments, I sent him a telegram. About a week later he
22 comes back with his furniture and his wife, who wasn't too
23 happy. We opened up Benyas Kaufman in February of 1951. We
24 found a store on Linwood near Grand Boulevard, which we
25 thought was kind of close to everything. I remember the rent

1 was \$60 a month, and that included and hot water, and it was
2 big enough for a little studio. We were fairly successful.
3 We built up a nice business.

4 About '59 we were growing, we were doing automotive,
5 we were doing food, jewelry, fashion, and we wanted to build a
6 studio, and we built the building on Nine Mile Road at
7 Rosewood. We found some land that was inexpensive and it was
8 perfect for our purpose, and we built what was considered the
9 outstanding studio in Detroit. A small studio. It wasn't
10 that big.

11 Another interesting factor about the studio was we
12 didn't have any money. How do you build a studio without
13 money? Well, Eisenhower was president and the only Republican
14 that did any good. You could get a SBA loan if you could do
15 government photography. So we had to fill out a lot forms
16 that we could do government photography, and they wanted to
17 know, could we photograph a tank. We said, of course we could
18 photograph a tank. He said, well, when you build this studio,
19 you have to have a floor that's eight foot thick of concrete,
20 steel reinforced, and they gave us the money. They gave us
21 \$50,000. We paid it off in ten years. It was a low interest
22 loan. I don't think those exist anymore, but they really
23 helped a lot of small businesses get started.

24 We had the money for the land. We bought three lots
25 on Nine Mile Road. But we didn't have the money to build the

1 studio.

2 We found a great architect who was working out of a
3 tiny little room. He was willing to design the plans if we
4 would give him free rent for a year, which was okay with us.
5 His name was Sandy Rossen. He was a very fine architect,
6 designed a lot of very nice buildings. Unfortunately passed
7 away awhile ago.

8 The building was great, and everything was fine for
9 a long time. It came time to sell it. We did sell it. Got a
10 good price for it. And we pretty much split up. We're still
11 friends, but we split up the business. And I'm working as a
12 free lancer, and I had a job today. I'm busy.

13 And that's sort of the overall personal picture,
14 except for the birth of our children and now grandchildren,
15 which is the most important things. And Shirley and I have
16 been fairly healthy and lucky to be married all these years.
17 We have a lot of friends that are married for a long time.
18 One divorce that we know of, but other than that our friends
19 are all married a long time.

20 The one thing that bothers me is that I always dealt
21 with women. All the PR people, my whole career, ^{WERE} ~~was~~ women, and
22 I never had an affair. I said, there's got to be something
23 wrong with me. I never had an affair.

24 Let's talk about my career. What happened, as I did
25 my photography of the various agencies in Detroit, and almost

1 every Jewish agency, and a number of Christian agencies -- and
2 by the way, I was also very proud of the fact that I was the
3 official photographer of the League of Catholic Women for ten
4 years. They had a magazine, and I was the illustrator for
5 their stories.

6 Let me tell you how that came about. That came
7 about in an interesting way. When I came back to Detroit, I
8 wanted to get national exposure, and I went to New York,
9 called on editors to see if I could get some work from
10 national magazines, and they directed me to a picture agency
11 called Black Star. They accepted me as their Michigan
12 photographer, and I was their photographer for 50 years. I
13 had a lot of national and international assignments from just
14 about everything your could think of.

15 I just received something that was extremely nice.
16 About 25 years ago I photographed Joyce Carol Oates for her
17 first book, called Them. Last year they republished 35 of her
18 books, and they decided to use the photograph that I took of
19 her, not on the back flap but on the front cover with my name
20 on it. Unbelievable. The whole front cover is Joyce Carol
21 Oates, and this big picture of her, and on the bottom it says
22 photo by Bob Benyas. And I got a nice check. I had to give
23 permission to use it, which was fine.

24 I did photograph a lot of well-known people, but
25 what I'm trying to get to is I got very interested in all

1 these organizations, and I joined many of them. Took cards,
2 solicited people, particularly Federation. I used to solicit
3 like everybody else on Super Sunday or any day. I was active
4 in a lot of things. And I did get on some boards. Today I'm
5 on the board of the American Jewish Committee, which I love.
6 I think it's a fantastic organization. I like it because
7 there's a lot of young people involved that are very bright,
8 and our meetings are interesting.

9 I've done a lot of things for Israel Bonds.

10 **MR. MERETSKY:** Jewish Historical Society.

11 **MR. BENYAS:** Jewish Historical Society. I've
12 photographed Stan Meretsky and other great people that I like.
13 And I did your wedding; right?

14 **MR. MERETSKY:** Yes. Five years ago.

15 **MR. BENYAS:** So I really got involved. I wasn't
16 just a photographer. And I think people appreciated that.
17 They kept calling. They're still calling me. And I felt very
18 close to all these organizations.

19 But the one that we became the most active in,
20 Shirley and I -- Shirley had the Yiddish education which I
21 didn't have, but we wanted to send our children to the school
22 that Sholem Aleichem has. So both became very involved in
23 Sholem Aleichem and worked on various committees. I did
24 become the president about 1970 I think. I was president for
25 seven years. We innovated many, many things. And I'm still

1 very proud of the fact that we kept that organization going.

2 I followed Mike Zeltzer, who had been the president
3 for 20 years. As great as Mike is, Mike is absolutely
4 wonderful, he pretty much ran Sholem Aleichem. It was Mike
5 and an administrator. When I came in, through my photography
6 at other organizations, I realized you need a board of
7 directors, you need annual meetings, you have to give an
8 award, and I instituted that. That really saved the
9 organization. Our school was failing. The school closed. We
10 didn't have enough. We had a wonderful school of about 400
11 kids at one time, a Yiddish school, but they taught Hebrew and
12 Jewish history. Then the school didn't exist. The
13 organization would have failed, but I think we brought it back
14 to life. I was the president, Shirley really -- I couldn't
15 have done it without her. She was the one that helped me with
16 almost everything.

17 It's a flourishing organization today, but with a
18 small group of people. Similar to the Jewish Historical
19 Society. There's a handful of people that do all the work,
20 and that seems to be true.

21 But I think life has paralleled my photography and
22 my organizational work. I did both almost equally. I think
23 I've had a good life. I think it's been important to me.

24 **MR. MERETSKY:** Well, I met you back in the mid '60s
25 when I was the advertising manager of a company, and you did

1 some advertising photography for me. In fact I tried to find
2 that first ad when I first met you, and I couldn't find it in
3 the scrapbook right away. And I've followed your career, seen
4 your name a thousand times over. You've led a wonderful
5 career and life.

6 **MR. BENYAS:** Well, I just photographed a meeting at
7 Wal-Mart, in Howell, Michigan. They had presidents of all
8 their suppliers come. There were about 30 presidents or
9 chairmen of the board come to a Wal-Mart. They are now the
10 biggest suppliers for Wal-Mart. And I was asked to photograph
11 all of these big shots. When I was introduced, I was
12 introduced as the photographer that's photographed all the
13 presidents of the United States. And I said, yeah, Lincoln
14 was my favorite. That got a little laugh.

15 Actually, I did photograph everybody from
16 Eisenhower, except Nixon. For some reason Nixon never came to
17 Detroit. When the presidents came here, early on it was
18 always Labor Day when they would come or fund-raisers. Jimmy
19 Carter came here. Somebody hired me to photograph him with
20 people. I didn't know who Jimmy Carter was. I didn't even
21 care, and then he became president.

22 They were all regular guys. Clinton was just a
23 regular guy. You could call him Bill. When I was in a room
24 with him, I called him Bill. As a matter of fact I was at
25 David Hermelin's house for a fund-raiser, and there was Bill

1 Berman, who you've probably either interviewed or will
2 interview, Bill Davidson and Bill Clinton. They were kind of
3 far apart, and I said, would you Bills kind of get together,
4 get a little closer. They all giggled and I got a good
5 picture.

6 I should spend some time talking about David
7 Hermelin because there was nobody like David, just so
8 wonderful in the community. This community would not be where
9 it is today without David Hermelin. Other men worked very
10 hard, but always quietly. David was a master fund-raiser.
11 People didn't mind giving money. If David called, you doubled
12 your pledge, and you didn't mind.

13 There was a period, probably when -- I was at the
14 Hermelins' house once a month, and it wasn't only Jewish
15 events. It was everything. It was the symphony, it was Red
16 Cross. It didn't matter what it was, David opened his house
17 and called me as the photographer, and I did a lot of stuff.
18 David's one of my very special people in the world.

19 Other people, Max Fisher. Now, Max is a quiet man,
20 but you're so impressed with him, his gifts are so enormous.
21 It's exceeded \$35 million over the years, I think. Something
22 like that. His daughter Jane has followed in his footsteps.
23 She's fantastic.

24 And being around those people has also been a big
25 influence on me because they're all so wonderful. I haven't

1 met anybody in the Jewish community I didn't like. I was
2 trying to think, was there anybody that was a son of a bitch?
3 I don't think so. I think everybody was so dedicated to
4 Jewish causes, Israel of course.

5 Two I have to mention are Paul Zuckerman and David
6 Mondry. They were the heart and soul of Israel. They passed
7 away. They just gave everything. Israel was the number one
8 thing in their lives and they worked so hard.

9 When you photograph people like that, something
10 happens. They're just so special. And you can't take a bad
11 picture of them. No matter how you photograph them, they're
12 so terrific that the photographs come out terrific. And I
13 think I was lucky that I photographed great people to make
14 great photographs.

15 I'm only naming a couple, but there were many
16 through the years. And many women. Today was a women's
17 meeting for Israel bonds. There were 50 women there. And I
18 knew almost all of them. They're active. They work in
19 everything. They worked on the Balfour concert, they work at
20 the Holocaust Memorial. Certain people work on everything.

21 I know you know these people, too. They're just so
22 involved. Judy Cantor, who's the past president of the
23 Historical Society, was there, and she's going to head up the
24 350th anniversary of Jews in America. She got her start I
25 think with the Jewish Historical Society.

1 **MR. MERETSKY:** Absolutely.

2 **MR. BENYAS:** And many others at the Historical
3 Society that you could name that were influential to me.
4 Mostly females. The husbands always went along, or if it was
5 a man, the wife went along. I mean this community has been
6 family oriented, and now it's been wonderful to see second
7 generation, third generation, maybe fourth generation of
8 people that are still involved.

9 And of course you know that Shirley and I are so
10 proud of Dorothy, our daughter-in-law, who's the chief
11 financial officer of Federation. To me that's incredible,
12 that she would do that and become so important, and everybody
13 I meet tells me what a good job Dorothy's doing, how wonderful
14 she is.

15 I was a film photographer for many, many years, and
16 you have to really concentrate when you're a film
17 photographer. Just like our video photographer. You have to
18 be aware that you loaded the camera right. That the film went
19 through. You have to worry about getting it developed.

20 Well, digital, that's all gone. I mean you put a
21 card in there. You can take 1000 pictures without changing
22 film. You can check the back of the camera. The pictures are
23 there. And Cannon just announced a camera which has a little
24 radio transmitter in the camera. As you take pictures, it
25 will automatically download the photographs into a computer,

1 and if you have a printer, you can be printing them out as
2 you're taking them. That was just announced. It's a little
3 expensive. You have to want to be doing that.

4 For a couple years, at the Auto Show I did Ford of
5 Europe. They get the pictures in Europe before they wake up,
6 because I go to the Auto Show before it opens, like at eight
7 o'clock in the morning. I do the Ford exhibits digitally, put
8 it on a computer, e-mail it to London, and they get the
9 pictures before they wake up.

10 **MR. MERETSKY:** It's amazing.

11 **MR. BENYAS:** Before you had to develop the film. It
12 took a day or two. You had to mail them, maybe Fed Express
13 them. I did a lot of assignments for *Life Magazine* and on a
14 number of assignments they would have an airplane waiting for
15 me because of deadline restraints. I'd take the pictures and
16 run to the airplane in a cab or something, give them the film,
17 and they would fly it to the art to develop it. Now you can
18 transmit as you go.

19 I would say half of my jobs I'm not making any
20 pictures. I burn a CD on my computer, and then I hand them
21 the CD. Or I can do it at a lab. I recently had a job where
22 they wanted nine CDs. I took my grandson, and he sat at the
23 computer and burned nine CDs, and we gave everybody in the
24 family one. It was a 90th birthday party. Everybody in the
25 family got a CD of everything I took, maybe 150, 200 pictures.

1 And that never happened.

2 **MR. MERETSKY:** It's amazing, Bob. You started out
3 when cameras had a plate in the back.

4 **MR. BENYAS:** Right. Actually had to load the plate.

5 **MR. MERETSKY:** Then you went through the 35mm
6 revolution.

7 **MR. BENYAS:** Right.

8 **MR. MERETSKY:** And now it's the digital revolution.

9 **MR. BENYAS:** What's next? I don't know.

10 **MR. MERETSKY:** Can't even begin to guess.

11 **MR. BENYAS:** I remember movie camera where you had
12 to crank it.

13 **MR. MERETSKY:** I have an antique camera collection,
14 so I know about some these really old ones and whatnot.

15 **MR. BENYAS:** Yes. My closest friend, who's my
16 fraternity brother, Sid Siegel, he was with CBS for more than
17 25 years, and he was like the first news cameraman in Detroit.
18 They brought a guy in from Cleveland when television first
19 started to do local TV news. Sid was a photographer from
20 childhood I think. Very early on he had a movie camera, made
21 little home movies. He was the first one at CBS, at Channel
22 2. He's retired from there now, and we're still good friends.
23 And we've talked about how cameras have changed.

24 He had to develop the film. He had a big processor
25 -- probably fit in this room -- to develop the movie film.

1 Now it sits on a little card.

2 **MR. MERETSKY:** Live coverage then and live coverage
3 today are quite different.

4 **MR. BENYAS:** Some of the highlights in my career
5 were ground-breaking, and I photographed almost every building
6 built in the Jewish community in Detroit. I was present at
7 the ground-breaking. Somehow or other those were really
8 important to me because this was a structure. It wasn't just
9 a meeting where somebody gave money. But like Sinai Hospital
10 was such a great event. When I found out why they were
11 building Sinai Hospital and the fact that Jewish doctors could
12 not practice at Harper and the other hospitals downtown --
13 they restricted how many Jewish doctors -- they had to build a
14 Jewish hospital so Jewish doctors could practice. That blew
15 me away. I said, you know, this is America? 1955 or whenever
16 it was.

17 Sinai was great. Both our boys were born there, and
18 we're still friends with some of those doctors.

19 **MR. MERETSKY:** What are your sons names?

20 **MR. BENYAS:** Mark and Edward. Mark is married to
21 Dorothy, who's the chief financial officer. Mark was the
22 first born. We had a nice little house in Oak Park. It cost
23 13,990.

24 There's a cute story about the house. Shirley and I
25 lived in an apartment building on Coolidge and Eight Mile

1 Road, Blackstone Manor. Shirley would sing. And we had a
2 second floor apartment. She would practice because she's an
3 opera singer. The neighbor downstairs didn't like it. So we
4 figured we had to move, we've got to get our own house.

5 We didn't have any money, but we had a friend, Red
6 Gales. Do you remember Red Gales? He's passed away, but he
7 was very active in the community also. Red said, we'll move,
8 too. Find a house. New houses were going up in Oak Park.
9 They were 13,990, and you needed \$1,000 down, but you also
10 needed \$1,000 in the bank. So Red said, hey, I'll give you
11 all my money. Put it in your bank account that shows that
12 you've got a bank account. We had the \$1,000 for the deposit
13 and the payments were 80 bucks a month. But we had to have a
14 bank account of \$1,000 and we didn't have that. So Red gave
15 us his money, and then showed them the bank book, a thousand
16 bucks, and we got the house. And then we gave our money to
17 him so he would have \$1,000. And we were neighbors for a long
18 time. Then we each moved away. But we were good friends.

19 **MR. MERETSKY:** What street were you on in Oak Park?

20 **MR. BENYAS:** We were on Whitmore, 28175 Whitmore.
21 South of Nine Mile. A cute little house. We were very happy
22 there. Nineteen and a half years. And then I went nuts and
23 moved out to West Bloomfield and spent a lot of money. But
24 we're happy there, too. We're there 33 years.

25 **MR. MERETSKY:** And your other son?

1 **MR. BENYAS:** Well, Mark went to business school at
2 Michigan. Both boys went to Roeper 14 years. That's where
3 our money went. We put two boys through Roeper. They were
4 both very bright. When Mark graduated, he went to U of M
5 undergrad, and went to business school, and that's where he
6 met Dorothy. After he graduated he felt he should be a
7 lawyer, so he went to law school at Wayne.

8 Eddie also graduated from Roeper, went to Michigan,
9 and Michigan Law. He didn't know what to do. His brother
10 said, go to law school, you'll get a good education. He got a
11 very high score on the LSAT and he went to Michigan Law.
12 Interestingly enough, they both went to Chicago to practice.
13 When Mark and Dorothy got married, they went to Chicago. Mark
14 was in real estate and Dorothy was an accountant, a CPA. When
15 the baby was born, we talked them into coming back. There
16 were some other factors, but they did move back. They lived
17 in an apartment, and they got a nice little house in
18 Huntington Woods, where Dorothy grew up. She would only
19 consider Huntington Woods. She felt that's where a family has
20 to live.

21 They have this nice little boy, and Mark is working
22 in real estate as an attorney. Jordan is now 16. And then
23 they had a daughter, Dana, who will be bas mitzvahed this
24 November. She's 12, will be 13.

25 And Eddie practiced law in Chicago at a very

1 prestigious law firm, more than 100 years old. He worked
2 there for about four years. Eddie was a very fine musician,
3 got it from his mother obviously, was an oboist. And he liked
4 to conduct. At 10, 12 years he had little orchestras he
5 conducted. So he played music and conducted music the entire
6 time. After four years at law, he really felt he wanted to
7 pursue music, that this is what he really wanted. He decided
8 to go to Northwestern University, and he got a master's degree
9 in oboe performance and conducting. And all his time in
10 Chicago he was conducting a couple orchestras.

11 An opening appeared at a university in Illinois, the
12 University of Southern Illinois in Carbondale, as an
13 instructor in oboe and the conductor in the student orchestra.
14 He decided to take the job. He left a job paying a great deal
15 of money for about \$30,000 a year, but that's what he wanted.
16 He really wanted music. Now he's a full professor, and he
17 married a girl from that area, Chera, who's a very fine
18 pianist. Now they have a little girl who's a little more than
19 two years old. Her name is Gabriella. She's the apple of our
20 eye, along with Dana and Jordan, the other grandchildren.

21 You know, anybody who doesn't want to get married --
22 marriage is not so hot and children are not so hot, but
23 grandchildren are phenomenal. Grandchildren are the best.

24 **MR. MERETSKY:** I've got four coming in a couple
25 months.

1 **MR. BENYAS:** Have you? Four at once?

2 **MR. MERETSKY:** Pretty close.

3 **MR. BENYAS:** Everybody I know loves their
4 grandchildren more than their kids. Naturally we love our
5 children, too, and we're glad that they're successful and
6 happy and doing things that they want to do.

7 **MR. MERETSKY:** I think it's interesting how the arts
8 have been such a big part of your life. Your whole profession
9 is really an art profession.

10 **MR. BENYAS:** We work together. I do Shirley's head
11 shots that she uses for her plays. I photograph the plays
12 that she's in, the operas that she's been in. I'm currently
13 doing all of the photography, the last years, at JET, all the
14 plays. I like doing that.

15 **MR. MERETSKY:** Do you do Michigan Opera Theater
16 also?

17 **MR. BENYAS:** I did two operas that Shirley was in.
18 They have a regular photographer, but I asked if I could
19 photograph the ones that Shirley was in. She did *My Fair Lady*
20 at the Fisher and the *Follies*, also at the Fisher. Fantastic
21 show. Anybody that missed *Follies* -- everybody knows *My Fair*
22 *Lady*, they don't know *Follies*. And *Follies* is a wonderful
23 show. In *Follies* Shirley's role was of an old opera singer.
24 It takes place in a theater that's about to be torn down, and
25 they bring back some of the actors, and it's written so that

1 the older performers have a ghost image of themselves as
2 young. So you have another actor standing next to you who's a
3 younger person. If you ever get a chance to see *Follies*, see
4 it. I think it's one of the best written plays that I've ever
5 seen. There's a lot of wonderful plays, but this is so
6 clever. Shirley was in that and got very good notices. She's
7 had Best Actress award, Best Supporting Actress award from the
8 *Free Press*.

9 We have a lot of friends in the theater world. I
10 used to have a lot of photography friends, and we had a
11 wonderful organization called IPAM, which was Industrial
12 Photographers of Michigan, and it was mostly photographers
13 that worked for large corporations: Edison, Ford, General
14 Motors. And we had wonderful meetings. We'd have 200, 300
15 guys come to the meetings. There were only a couple guys like
16 myself who had small studios. These were mostly corporate
17 photographers. So we had the money to bring in the top
18 photographers. We had wonderful, wonderful meetings. A lot
19 of camaraderie. We had a dinner in December with our wives,
20 which was always so nice. But that doesn't exist anymore.

21 Photographers don't seem to talk like they used to.
22 I don't really communicate with many other photographers
23 unless I see them on an assignment, and then you're busy, and
24 you can't really say more than hello. And now they're all
25 younger than me. I was the youngest, I was a kid when I

1 started, and now I'm the oldest. That's what happens.

2 I should tell you about probably my greatest
3 assignment of all was the fact that I spent one week in
4 Jackson Prison. When I went to New York, I went up to a
5 magazine called *Coronet*. It was a small magazine, about the
6 size of *TV Guide*. I said, I'm in Michigan. Why don't I take
7 some pictures for you? About a week later I get a call that
8 said, how would you like to go to Jackson Prison and
9 photograph prisoners from the inside, and we don't want to
10 block out their face. You have to get permission from each
11 guy to use his picture. I said, yeah, I can do that. Why
12 not? I had no idea. I didn't even know where Jackson Prison
13 was. I'd only heard of it.

14 So I called up the warden, told him who I was, I'm a
15 photographer for *Coronet*, and I want to come and I want to
16 photograph prisoners, but I've got to get permission. They've
17 got to sign a release that I can use their picture. Is that
18 okay? And the warden's answer was obscenities, which I won't
19 repeat, but in a way he told me to go ahead, you can come.

20 I went to Jackson and I was ushered into the
21 warden's room, and I had a couple cameras around my neck, I
22 think a couple Leikas. He said, go anywhere you want. The
23 place is yours. Be my guest. And he gave me a trustee to go
24 with me.

25 I said to the trustee, you're a nice guy. What are

1 you in here for? He said murder.

2 **MR. MERETSKY:** What year was this?

3 **MR. BENYAS:** This was early. This was 1950. Going
4 back. Right after I came back from New York. My first big
5 assignment.

6 I did an absolutely terrible thing that you should
7 never do, but turned out to be the best thing I could possibly
8 do. When he was taking me around the prison, he took me to a
9 balcony, and there's this big yard, like almost bigger than
10 you can see, and yard is filled with guys, and there's a line.
11 I said, what are they doing in line? I'm very naive, I'm 26
12 years old. He said, oh, that's the chow line, they're getting
13 chow.

14 I'd been in the army, I knew what a chow line was.
15 I'll go out, I'll get in the chow line. There's no guards in
16 the yard, they're all prisoners, see. So he says, yeah, go
17 ahead.

18 I went down a ladder and I get in line. They guys
19 say, come on, get in line. You're okay. Somehow or other
20 they knew that I was going to be photographing from the
21 prisoners' point of view, and nobody bothered me. One guy
22 once said, I'm going to take your cameras and break them over
23 your head, and the other guys stopped him. I was so young,
24 just a photographer, and I didn't do anything.

25 But after that, because I ate their food, I went in

1 there and it's terrible. You get a metal tray with a spoon
2 and like slop. And you've got to eat that stuff. One piece
3 of bread. You can't talk, there's no talking. So I did eat
4 the food and then I took some pictures.

5 After that I went everywhere in the prison. I had
6 carte blanche. Nobody bothered me. They signed my releases,
7 because they figured I'm going to tell the story of a prisoner
8 from their point view. It ran in the magazine 16 pages. When
9 you get 16 pages in a magazine, as a young photographer, and a
10 byline, Robert Benyas -- I'm now Bob -- that was kind of an
11 important step for me. I still have that magazine. I should
12 have brought one to show you.

13 One other thing that I should tell you about that
14 comes to my mind, in the same period of time. Through
15 Shirley, because she's involved in music, we met some
16 musicians who were with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. The
17 Detroit Symphony Orchestra in those days were defunct. They
18 had no money. But there was a wonderful man who was a
19 violist, Valter Poole, and he decided to form the Little
20 Symphony and he would be the conductor. So these were
21 symphony musicians and they were getting paid like \$5 a
22 performance, wherever they could perform. One guy, Felix
23 Resnick, is still playing with the orchestra. We became very
24 good friends.

25 *Life Magazine* had a contest for young photographers.

1 You couldn't be 30. And I decided to photograph the Little
2 Symphony and submit it to this contest. It was the only
3 contest I ever entered because I don't believe in contests.
4 But I got an Honorable Mention. That helped my career.

5 Everybody was so wonderful to these guys. There was
6 no place to rehearse. They would rehearse in basements. They
7 would rehearse in churches. But there was a wonderful couple
8 that had a house in Detroit, not far from downtown, I forget
9 exactly where it was, but they were from Denmark, and they
10 wanted to teach ballroom dancing the way it was done in
11 Denmark, you know, white gloves.

12 He was a carpenter, and he build an addition to his
13 house so they could have a ballroom. It wasn't that big. Let
14 me say it was, I don't know, 30x40 maybe. And they allowed
15 the Detroit Symphony to rehearse there. They would dress up,
16 wear black tie and tails, to listen to the Detroit Symphony
17 Orchestra. That's the kind of people they were. I
18 photographed them, I did a story on them later on with their
19 dancing school.

20 After that, of course, the Detroit Symphony luckily
21 did come back to life, and we now have a wonderful symphony
22 with a wonderful conductor. But there was tough times.
23 People don't realize that.

24 These marvelous musicians -- you know, you're
25 bringing back memories to me. One guy was named as a

1 Communist by the House Unamerican Activities Committee. Now,
2 we have no idea if he had any connection with Communism at
3 all. But he was named and he was released from the symphony.
4 This was before the Little Symphony. This was when there was
5 a Detroit Symphony Orchestra. They fired him on the spot.
6 His name was in the *Detroit Times* as a Communist. We found
7 out later he was selling pots and pans door to door to make a
8 living. This was a nice guy. He never said anything to us
9 about any kind of Communism or anything like that.

10 But if you recall, the House Unamerican Activities
11 Committee was a terrible, terrible time. You could lose your
12 job in a minute if somebody just said you were a Communist.
13 There was no proof. The McCarthy era. It was a terrible,
14 terrible time.

15 **MR. MERETSKY:** I'm very familiar, although sort of
16 peripherally, with the symphony through the reclaiming of
17 Orchestra Hall.

18 **MR. BENYAS:** It's very important to Detroit to have
19 the symphony. Our friend Felix, I think he's the oldest
20 performing member of any orchestra. I think 55 years he's
21 played with the Detroit Symphony, going back to the middle
22 '40s. And he still plays. He's about 86, 87, and he can
23 fiddle away. He's conductor of the Birmingham Bloomfield
24 Symphony.

25 Interestingly enough, he lives across the street

1 from Mark and Dorothy, our children. So I go and visit Felix,
2 go over to see him when I'm at Mark's house and we have nice
3 conversations. Now that my son is a conductor, they talk,
4 too.

5 I've had a good career. Had very few bad moments.
6 There were some tough times financially, but everybody had
7 those. We've had a good life, good career, and met wonderful
8 people.

9 **MR. MERETSKY:** Do you have any brothers and sisters?

10 **MR. BENYAS:** I have a brother and a sister. My
11 sister lives in Florida, my brother is here.

12 My brother was never involved in any activity. I
13 took him with me on some of the big events. I would say, come
14 on, Don, come on with me. Somehow or other it wasn't what he
15 wanted to do. My sister I think is involved in some things in
16 Florida, but I'm not real sure about that.

17 **MR. MERETSKY:** How did your parents get you involved
18 with Jewish organizations?

19 **MR. BENYAS:** I don't think my parents were involved.
20 My dad worked very hard. There was no money in the '20s and
21 '30s. My dad worked very hard. My mother was a housewife.

22 Before my mother was married, she was a secretary at
23 Shaarey Zedek to Rabbi Herschman. So that's another
24 connection because Shaarey Zedek is one of the pillars of the
25 metropolitan Detroit. A lot of wonderful people came out of

1 Shaarey Zedek. And Beth El.

2 **MR. MERETSKY:** I wanted to talk about the fly on the
3 wall.

4 Would you tell me about your wedding at Temple
5 Israel.

6 **MR. BENYAS:** My family were members of Temple
7 Israel, founding members. I went to high school at Beth El,
8 and the family went with Rabbi Fram to Temple Israel, so my
9 family ~~was~~^{WERE} members. Shirley was a soloist at Temple Israel.
10 When we decided to get married -- it was March 18, 1951 --
11 Temple Israel was only partially built. There was no
12 sanctuary; there was a hall. I think we were the first
13 wedding -- there might have been some before that where they
14 got married at the DIA. For a number of years Temple Israel
15 had their services at the DIA. We were one of the very first
16 at Temple Israel.

17 We were very fond of Rabbi Fram and the Cantor
18 Tulman. Later on we were friends of the other rabbis,
19 particularly Monty Syme. We thought he was an absolutely
20 wonderful man.

21 **MR. MERETSKY:** I have one question I want to ask
22 you. Back to the first time you picked up a camera, you were
23 a youngster.

24 **MR. BENYAS:** Probably a \$10 camera, but it came out.
25 I didn't know what to do.

1 **MR. MERETSKY:** How old were you?

2 **MR. BENYAS:** I remember I was at Durfee Intermediate
3 School. A friend of mine, who I'm still friends with, Irv
4 Stolman, had a dark room, and he said, come over, I'll show
5 you how to make pictures. We had little trays and you went up
6 and down with the film to develop it. He showed me how to do
7 that. So I went and got a camera. I don't know if somebody
8 gave it to me or I bought it for \$10, whatever it was. Right
9 away I started taking pictures of my brother and sister and
10 some of the neighbor kids. I needed money to buy more film
11 and paper, so I would sell them for a quarter, a dime,
12 whatever I could get for my pictures. So I'm a professional
13 from the age of probably 13, 14, something like that. And I
14 never stopped. I've got a job tonight. Long career.

15 **MR. MERETSKY:** Your former partner, Jack Kaufman, is
16 he still in photography, too?

17 **MR. BENYAS:** Yeah, I think he is. Jack and I did
18 pretty much different photography. I was really only a
19 photojournalist and stuck with that. Jack was more of a
20 studio photographer and did a lot of very delicate things that
21 were very difficult to do, such as jewelry or food.

22 I'll tell you the story of the strawberry shortcake.
23 There was an ad that Wrigley Market was running, and what they
24 wanted was a box of strawberries, and the strawberries falling
25 down onto a strawberry shortcake. So how do you do that? It

1 was in the '60s or '70s. Shirley made the strawberry
2 shortcake. She didn't want to make a big one. So we got toy
3 tins that little children would play with to pretend cooking,
4 and Shirley made the cake. So they were small.

5 Then what we did -- Jack did this. We were both
6 helpers, Shirley and I were both his helpers. The
7 strawberries were coming out of the box. That was one
8 picture. Then we shot straight down on a bunch of
9 strawberries falling down. And then we did three shots of the
10 strawberry shortcake. This is before computers, see, and an
11 artist had to put those together. It ran a full page in one
12 of the papers, maybe both papers, and it looked like a box of
13 strawberries with the strawberries falling down on the cake.
14 Everybody liked that shot.

15 Jack did that kind of work. He was willing to do
16 that. I didn't have the patience. Like a necklace, to turn
17 every little stone in the right direction. So we were good
18 partners for a long time.

19 We did fashion at the studio. We did a lot of food.
20 We did a lot of catalogues, Christmas type catalogues.
21 Cunningham Drug Stores was a big client of ours at one time.
22 And I did a lot of car photography, too.

23 **MR. MERETSKY:** You mentioned the tank before.

24 **MR. BENYAS:** We never had to photograph a tank. But
25 we had the studio that would take -- we had a big door that

1 would open up so a tank -- oh, wait a minute. Now I'm going
2 to tell you about the most important thing in studio, and that
3 is we photographed the model for the World Trade Center.
4 Yamasaki designed the model for the World Trade Center. Our
5 studio ceiling was 20 feet high, and the model of the World
6 Trade Center was 16 feet high. So Yamasaki came to the studio
7 with about 20 assistants and about 30 boxes of little things,
8 and they assembled this in the studio. It was a model of the
9 riverfront of New York with the World Trade Center.

10 I said, how are you going to build that? I mean it
11 went almost to our ceiling. They had little mock-ups of other
12 buildings that were a third of the size, quarter of the size,
13 eighth of the size, and the whole little waterfront, and we
14 photographed that. They brought in their own photographer but
15 they used our studio. We were the assistants.

16 We rented our studio a number of times to other
17 photographers who were our friends, and we got some
18 interesting things.

19 Book fairs. The Book Fair, this will be my 53rd
20 Book Fair. Irwin Shaw hired me. It's too bad he's gone
21 because everybody loved that man, and he started Book Fair.
22 Because I was the Federation photographer and I did work for
23 the Jewish Center, asked me to come and photograph the first
24 Book Fair, which was three days, and it was wonderful.

25 There was a little center on Dexter Davison that was

1 an interim center, before they built the one on Curtis and
2 Meyers. There was a building that was abandoned that they
3 made into a center for like two years, and that's where the
4 first Book Fair was. And I've photographed almost every
5 author for 53 years. I've only missed a couple, and I only
6 missed them because I had another assignment and I had to get
7 another photographer to photograph that particular speaker.
8 Luckily I don't get sick in November, never had a cold. We
9 photographed so many fabulous people in Book Fair and spent
10 time with them. Many people from Israel, prime ministers
11 came.

12 I'm going to tell you about three people and then
13 I'll conclude. The first one was Eleanor Roosevelt, and
14 Shirley went with me. We were in a room with Eleanor
15 Roosevelt and you thought you were in a room with God. We
16 were so impressed with this lady, and she was very gentle.
17 Later in her life, I don't remember the year, it was for
18 Israel Bonds at Shaarey Zedek, I do remember that. And we
19 have that picture.

20 We also photographed -- another one that comes to
21 mind is Simon Weisenthal. He came to Book Fair and I brought
22 him home to our house for dinner. I have a picture of him
23 with our two boys.

24 But the two people that impressed me most was Golda
25 Meir. This was Federation meetings when they would come. And

1 Moshe Dayan. I have blow-ups of both of them. They had these
2 great faces that any photographer would dream over just
3 looking at them, let alone photographing them. Golda Meir was
4 so bright and so sharp. They were asking her some pretty
5 tough questions, and she answered them and she just blew them
6 all away.

7 Moshe Dayan was kind of a glamour boy and the women
8 all loved this guy, and they all wanted a picture with him.
9 You know, he had one eye. He'd lost an eye. I was taking his
10 photograph and his eye was bothering him. So his security
11 guard came over to me and said, don't take anymore pictures.
12 His eye is bothering him. But women all wanted a picture with
13 him. So I said, I'll take the pictures, but I've got to take
14 it from this side. I don't want to hurt his eye. I'll take
15 it from the blind side so the good eye is okay. I took a few
16 like that, and he liked the women, so he would put his arm
17 around them, and I'd get a picture.

18 Finally, he said to me, no more pictures, you don't
19 take pictures, and I don't know why I had the guts, but I
20 said, you're not my general. He looked at me, and he said, go
21 ahead, take the pictures. So I got a picture of every lady in
22 the room with Moshe Dayan.

23 I met a lot of these important people, but somehow
24 or other they were like everybody else. I was friends with
25 the janitor at the Center building, and he was as important to

1 me as these other people. We're in a society today where we
2 think that Hollywood stars are so great and they're wonderful.
3 But they're really no different. They aren't any smarter or
4 better. Maybe they're a little better looking. I don't know.

5 **MR. MERETSKY:** Let me ask you, the collection of all
6 your negatives, you've donated all of them to the Federation
7 archives?

8 **MR. BENYAS:** They went to Federation archives. My
9 United Way, which I also did about 45 years, went to the Wayne
10 State University archives. And of course many of my national
11 assignments went to Black Star. They have those negatives.
12 And I'm still getting some negatives. Some of those pictures
13 are sold over and over. A particular nature. I don't get a
14 lot of money, but I do get a few checks now and then.

15 My prison story sold for 40 years. I got a royalty
16 check every three months for 40 years from one of the prison
17 pictures. Black Star handled it, and they would send me a
18 check. It wasn't a lot. \$100, \$200. But it ended up being
19 quite a bit of money if you think about 40 years of royalties.

20 Now other photographers have gone into prisons and
21 photographed people actually behind bars. As matter of fact
22 that's how I got the League of Catholic Women job. They were
23 going to do a story on women in prison, and they said, oh,
24 yeah, there's a guy that goes into the prison. That was me.
25 Get Bob. And then I was a photographer for ten years for

1 League of Catholic Women for their magazine, until their
2 magazine folded.

3 The prisoners were okay guys, too. They weren't any
4 different. And none of them were guilty. I talked to a lot
5 of guys in prison. What did you do? Nah, I didn't do
6 anything. They just caught me. Or I said, they caught you
7 doing what? B&E, breaking and entering. They never admitted
8 to anything. But the warden told me, these are dangerous
9 people. We've got to keep them locked up. But they were nice
10 to me.

11 **MR. MERETSKY:** Well, I think Shirley made a very
12 smart investment in you when she bought those pictures of her
13 head shot.

14 **MR. BENYAS:** Right.

15 **MR. MERETSKY:** For the couple bucks she invested in
16 you, I think she's gotten back in ten-fold. Just listening to
17 you and your personality and how you've gotten along with
18 people and how you talk.

19 Now that you're on the other side of the camera
20 today, it is certainly very easy to see why you've been so
21 successful.

22 **MR. BENYAS:** Well, thank you, Stan. I appreciate
23 what you have done, and our photographer is working so hard
24 there.

25 I think the archive is really important. I don't

1 know who will see these pictures, but if you forget the past,
2 you're destined to make the same mistakes; right?

3 **MR. MERETSKY:** Yes, you're right on that point. You
4 as a photographer are more aware than most people of what
5 those photos will mean now and 100 years from now. The same
6 with these when your great grandchildren and their
7 grandchildren can see this tape and understand where their
8 family came from.

9 That's the next reason we need a Jewish museum in
10 this city.

11 **MR. BENYAS:** Right, we do. We also need a Jewish
12 theater. The JET is too small. We really need a decent
13 theater, because the JET theater is an important part of our
14 community.

15 I loved Sinai Hospital, and now that's gone. I love
16 the Holocaust Museum. It's not in the greatest place, but
17 it's so important for the world to know what happened in World
18 War II, and they're really doing a good job of educating. The
19 docents are very dedicated.

20 I see this through the whole community. I see a lot
21 of hard-working people. Why the world hates Jews I have no
22 idea, because I have never met a bad person, never met a bad
23 person.

24 **MR. MERETSKY:** I'm amazed, Bob. The Detroit
25 Symphony Orchestra would not exist if it were not for the

1 Jewish community. The Detroit Institute of Arts, the Detroit
2 Historical Museum.

3 **MR. BENYAS:** We should talk about Leonard Simons,
4 talking about the Detroit Historical Museum. He started it.
5 His daughter is carrying on. So many things were started by
6 Jews. At one time at the United Way, Max Fisher was the
7 biggest individual giver. There were large corporate gifts,
8 but he was the largest individual giver. Max Fisher was the
9 chairman of the board of the United Way, and I don't know if
10 it would exist without what Max started.

11 **MR. MERETSKY:** Look at what Max Fisher's nephew,
12 Stephen Roth, just did for the University of Michigan.

13 **MR. BENYAS:** And his son-in-law, Cummings, will be
14 honored at the yeshiva dinner, and I'll be photographing that,
15 too, in about a month.

16 All these organizations have grown through the
17 generosity of the Detroit Jews. There's no community like it.
18 That's what I'm told. People come from other cities, other
19 states, and they say there's nothing like Detroit.

20 **MR. MERETSKY:** And I call you the official
21 photographer of the Jewish community of Detroit. I think that
22 would be a very apropos title for you.

23 **MR. BENYAS:** Well, thank you. It's something I
24 enjoy doing, and glad I was part of it.

25 We should spend some time on the Ecumenical

1 Institute. That is not a Jewish organization, primarily, but
2 Jews were very instrumental in starting it.

3 Jim Lyons was a reverend, and he wanted to outreach,
4 he wanted to do more in the community to get people to like
5 each other, because each little church wouldn't talk to any
6 other church, and he didn't like that.

7 He found a man who said I'll give you \$100,000 to
8 start this Ecumenical Institute. I met Jim, and he called me.
9 He said, we're having a meeting. Will you come and take
10 pictures. So I've been taking their pictures ever since.

11 Since then we've gotten a lot of wonderful people
12 involved in the Ecumenical Institute, primarily to get people
13 to talk together, not only Christians and Jews, but churches.
14 Two Lutheran churches that don't talk. Get them to talk, a
15 dialogue. That was the whole thing. Jim Lyons was the spark
16 plug of that.

17 Since that time another man stepped in, David
18 Blewett. He's an incredible guy and really tries very hard.

19 There was a lot of animosity. People didn't want to
20 get together. People were afraid they'd lose membership. If
21 you belonged to a synagogue or church and you joined something
22 else, and there were dues, they figured they would lose their
23 members. So a lot of people didn't want to join. Slowly they
24 realized that this was important and they did join.

25 It's still a small organization, not as big as it

1 should be, because I think it's very important.

2 **MR. MERETSKY:** Also the Jewish Community Council.

3 **MR. BENYAS:** Council I didn't do a lot, but the
4 Council of course was very important, and we have wonderful
5 leadership there, lay leadership as well as professional
6 leadership. I'm friends of all the leaders and I love them
7 all. I think they're all terrific. They all work hard.

8 I just had a little session at ^{BAR ILAN} ~~Barry Lawn~~. They're
9 fantastic. They work so hard. The professional people don't
10 make a lot of money. They work very hard to get the community
11 together. We have a marvelous community, maybe the best in
12 the world.

13 Did I miss anybody?

14 **MR. MERETSKY:** I don't know. You're such a great
15 interviewee.

16 **MR. BENYAS:** Have you got more time? There's one we
17 should talk about. We should talk about Sinai Hospital.

18 **MR. MERETSKY:** Oh, yes.

19 **MR. BENYAS:** Because I was at the beginning with
20 Sinai with Dr. Priver, the first meeting they had in
21 somebody's house. There were just a few men that got together
22 and said we've got to build this Jewish hospital because
23 Jewish doctors didn't have a place to practice. We did
24 mention that earlier a little bit. But then Sinai grew to be
25 just a wonderful, wonderful hospital. Our children were born

1 there, which is important. Sadly enough it doesn't exist
2 anymore. But there were wonderful people there.

3 I photographed like brick by brick of that hospital.
4 I was their photographer for ten years, and then they decided
5 to hire a full-time photographer. I was free lance. I had my
6 own studio, but I was always free lance. I worked for
7 everybody.

8 Then Sinai had a full-time photographer. In fact
9 they had a staff at one time, did a lot of research
10 photography. I was doing more public relations photography.

11 **MR. MERETSKY:** You were there when Leonard Simons
12 and Shapiro and all the others --

13 **MR. BENYAS:** Well, Dr. Priver and Aronson, Srere.
14 Those names are still on all the plaques.

15 **MRS. BENYAS:** Tell them about the first open heart
16 operation that you witnessed.

17 **MR. BENYAS:** Oh, yes. That was at Harper. I had an
18 assignment from a national magazine. They were going to do
19 the first open heart surgery. That was early, 1951 or '52.
20 And it was a child that had a hole in the heart and they were
21 going to patch the hole from one ventricle to the other. What
22 was happening was one side of the heart was becoming very
23 small and the other side was getting very big, and they knew
24 if they patched it, the child would actually -- the term they
25 used was they would drown in their own blood. But there was

1 no hope. This child would only live a matter of days.

2 I did it for a national medical magazine, I can't
3 remember the name, but it was some national medical magazine.
4 So I was scrubbed, the camera was wrapped in plastic with a
5 little hole around the lens, and I was in there about 18
6 hours, and they were working on this child that long. The
7 heart lung machine was a motor they got from General Motors
8 and they put wires together. It was very, very crude, but it
9 was the first open heart surgery in the United States.

10 I saw the child, who was maybe seven or eight years
11 old, and they told me ahead of time the child would not live,
12 because as soon as they would patch it, the blood would rush
13 to the smaller side and the heart would burst, the child
14 wouldn't live. But they were going to attempt it because the
15 child would die anyway.

16 The operation was over, they did patch the heart,
17 and it held, and they said, you can go home, it's over. We
18 just have to wait now. We didn't have a house then and we
19 were staying at my mother-in-law's, and I went home. Later I
20 called the hospital and the child had passed away, and I broke
21 down. I wept like I had never wept in my life because it was
22 a child.

23 When she woke up, she gave a few cries. I was in
24 there when they were taking her out of the anesthesia, and
25 then she was a human being. When I saw her in surgery, this

1 was the first time I'd ever been in surgery, it didn't mean
2 much to me because they were working in there and everything
3 was wrapped. Is that a child? you know. But when they closed
4 her up and she made a few cries, that was more than I could
5 handle.

6 But that was the beginning of open heart surgery and
7 now it's routine. I never did another one like that.

8 I did some other medical surgery, but nothing quite
9 like that. That was one of the outstanding things I did. It
10 ran for five or six pages. I can't think of the doctor's name
11 right now, but he became world famous. I was in on a lot of
12 firsts.

13 I photographed Henry Ford II one time -- I'll tell
14 you kind of a cute story. I called up and I said I don't want
15 a posed picture. They want a candid shot. I was ushered into
16 his office by a PR man, and he says, hey, I hear you want a
17 candid shot. I said, I would like a candid shot. He said,
18 wait a minute. He calls over his secretary and she sits on
19 his lap. He says, go ahead and take it. I had three cameras
20 loaded because I didn't know how many shots they'd let me
21 take, but I had three cameras loaded. I took one shot on one
22 roll, and then he said, you'd better take something else. I
23 said, okay, I think you're right. I'd better take something
24 else. So one roll had one picture and the other two cameras
25 he let me shoot the whole two rolls. Then we went to a car

1 and I took a picture of him by a car.

2 Being a little bit of a devil, I sent the one roll
3 in first to the editor. They had an airplane waiting for the
4 film. They had to have it in New York on this picture of
5 Henry Ford. Well, it wasn't very long they called me up; what
6 kind of a photographer are you? I can't use this picture of
7 Henry Ford with a woman on his lap. And you only shot one
8 frame. I said, just relax. That went by the plane but by UPS
9 I sent two more rolls of all kinds of shots, and it did run.
10 They ran an ad in the *New York Times*, a full page of Henry
11 Ford. I forget what it was about. But that was the only time
12 I was a devil. Most of the time I was a nice guy, but I just
13 felt that if he's a devil, I can be a devil.

14 **MRS. BENYAS:** You had some other firsts. One was
15 the Metropolitan Opera and one was Leonard Bernstein.

16 **MR. BENYAS:** Yeah. Shirley remembers more than I
17 do. This goes back to the Detroit Symphony. They were
18 restructuring the Detroit Symphony, and they were going to
19 have a program -- a Bach festival, wasn't it, Shirley? They
20 brought in young Leonard Bernstein to conduct the orchestra.
21 And they let me sit in the orchestra. I wore a tuxedo and I
22 had a camera. I was in about the third row, taking pictures.
23 It ran in the *New York Times*, had a big spread on Leonard
24 Bernstein.

25 The Metropolitan Opera, which came here every year

1 -- their first year in Detroit, but they always were on tour.
2 They took a train of props and sets and the last stop was
3 Detroit. They were doing Carmen, which turned out to be my
4 most favorite opera. It was Reesa Stevens, Richard Tucker,
5 Mario Sereney. I was in the wings, I shot in the wings, for
6 the *New York Times*. They were concluding their tour, and this
7 was to announce the new season in New York City.

8 I had this agent in New York, and he got me all
9 these great assignments from all over the world.

10 But this was back stage at the Metropolitan Opera.
11 I didn't go on stage. I was going to wear a uniform and be on
12 stage, but they didn't want me to.

13 Later on I made my debut in opera with Shirley.
14 That's another story that comes to my mind. As a matter of
15 fact it was the same opera. But I did photograph it from the
16 wings, and I did have kind of an interesting experience.
17 There was a very handsome, tall, distinguished-looking man in
18 the wings with me. I was photographing from the wings, and I
19 didn't want to go into the orchestra. And I wanted to make it
20 as real as I could. So I was in the wings, and I got some
21 pretty good shots.

22 Reesa Stevens, the soprano, came off stage, and she
23 walked right past us, and the man standing next to me said,
24 "That's my wife." I said, "That's your wife? She didn't even
25 say hello to you." And he told me, "Now she's not my wife;

1 she's Carmen. She's in the role. She didn't even recognize
2 me." And that's the first time I kind of understood.

3 Shirley was an opera singer and I knew a little bit
4 about opera, but then I realized that when you're an actor or
5 an opera singer and you're in a role, you're in the role,
6 you're that person, you take on that persona. So she didn't
7 say hello to me, she didn't say hello to her husband.

8 I liked opera but I didn't know about opera until I
9 met Shirley, who was an opera singer, and she introduced me to
10 opera. Then I really loved it. I still love opera. And now
11 my son is a conductor. My son is a professor of music, and he
12 does conduct opera. And he used his mother as a soprano in
13 Beethoven's Ninth, which was kind of a thrill.

14 **MR. MERETSKY:** It's easy to see where your children
15 got the encouragement from.

16 **MR. BENYAS:** Well, the other son doesn't like opera,
17 doesn't like classical music. He likes jazz. And he's a very
18 fine photographer. Eddie, the younger son, is a professor of
19 music, loves opera, loves classical music, doesn't take very
20 good pictures.

21 **MR. MERETSKY:** Well, I want to thank you so much.
22 We've had a fabulous time with you.

23 **MR. BENYAS:** My pleasure. You know, I've probably
24 photographed everybody that you're going to interview.

25 **MR. MERETSKY:** I imagine you have. We've started

1 with all the leadership, the older leadership, and then we've
2 got a list of a couple hundred people.

3 **MR. BENYAS:** Do you have anymore tape? Let me tell
4 you about Max Fisher. I photographed all the meetings at Max
5 Fisher's house that they had. That was the big Federation
6 meeting. That's when they raised probably half of the goal,
7 whatever year it was. To be at Max's house was so special.
8 You could never say enough about Max, what Max has done for
9 this community. And he was also very photogenic and so his
10 wife. His wife was beautiful, Margie. They were very
11 hospitable.

12 We would go there once a year for this meeting, and
13 that's when I think the minimum gift was \$100,000 on up. And
14 Max always made a gift of a million, and there were a couple
15 other people that came close to that. The leadership of
16 Detroit was there and me, and my gift in those days was
17 probably \$500 or maybe in a couple years \$1,000 was my gift.
18 But I was only invited as a photographer.

19 At those meetings Max was so inspiring, and this
20 community would not be the same without Max and David
21 Hermelin. I have to talk about David Hermelin, because as
22 wonderful as Max was, there was nobody like David. There was
23 a two-year period when I was at David's house maybe once a
24 month, 10 or 12 times a year, for all kinds of different
25 charitable events, and everybody gave to David. When David

1 asked for a pledge, you pledged, and you pledged good.

2 Let me mention one more guy who passed away too
3 young I think, and that's Paul Zuckerman. The meetings with
4 Paul Zuckerman were after the Fisher meeting, so it was a step
5 down from the very big givers. Israel was in his blood, and
6 I'm talking about the early years of Israel, during the war
7 years, when people gave five times, ten times their normal
8 gift to help Israel in the war, and Paul was the spark plug.
9 There was always the Max Fisher meeting and people gave
10 wonderful gifts, but Paul Zuckerman was quite a guy, and to be
11 at his house, and with his wife, who is still around, and his
12 daughter, too, is very active, and it was really special and
13 influenced me. Those people were big influences in my life to
14 participate, the importance of giving, and to know them. To
15 know David Hermelin and Max Fisher, it's really special.

16 More important than presidents. I photographed all
17 the presidents, but they didn't impress me like these people.
18 And other people that you'll be interviewing, the women,
19 fabulous women in this community. I don't want to mention any
20 because I'll probably forget some names, but they were truly
21 wonderful, wonderful people.

22 **MR. MERETSKY:** You've been the fly on the wall.

23 **MR. BENYAS:** I was the fly on the wall.

24 **MR. MERETSKY:** You've seen these people, you know
25 how they truly are. They've stopped to pose for you.

1 **MR. BENYAS:** I was a photo-journalist early on. I
2 told you about the disaster in the mine when the photographer,
3 and I asked him, how do you photograph these people crying,
4 and he taught me how to do that, to be involved and be
5 invisible.

6 And you know, we had all these meetings and we had
7 wonderful black tie events. We had meetings at the Statler
8 and the Book Cadillac. We don't have that anymore. I guess
9 we can't afford those big dinner meetings. Everything now is
10 done in the home. But they were fabulous and those people
11 worked so hard to help Israel and help local charities. We
12 probably have the best local charities.

13 And you're right, I was there, I was the fly on the
14 wall. I tried not to disturb anybody. I worked with Leika
15 cameras, which were very quiet. I even built a little muffle
16 around them so they wouldn't make the click, would be very
17 quiet. That was my technique.

18 Now when I come in, they're glad to see me. Hey,
19 Bob's here. Now we know we'll be recorded. I do a lot of
20 stuff for the *Jewish News* now and they want to be in the
21 *Jewish News*.

22 I think you've got me wrung out.

23 **MR. MERETSKY:** All right. Well, thank you very
24 much. We'll call it a wrap.

25 **MR. BENYAS:** Okay.